nial and postcolonial Congo-Brazzaville, will learn from this fine book.

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**Pier M. Larson. *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora.*** New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xx + 378 pp. List of Figures. List of Maps, Tables, and Graphs. Archives Abbreviations. Index. $108.00. Cloth. $35.99. Paper.

Debates around creolization and ethnicity have dominated discussions on the history of ways in which Africans and their descendents have identified themselves in the Americas. In *Ocean of Letters*, Pier Larson takes these debates to the western Indian Ocean, where he examines the construction of a Malagasy-speaking diaspora in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the process he turns to a history of language and reading to decipher the ways in which these settlers forged a sense of identity tied to the Big Island and its political communities. Set within the constraints of changing structures of demography, religion, slavery, politics, and imperialism, this is cultural history at its best.

"The Indian Ocean is not the Atlantic" (350), Larson helpfully informs us toward the end of his book, acknowledging Hubert Gerbeau. Europeans formed only a small part of the swirling populations brought to the Mascarene and Comoro islands from Arabia, Africa, India, and Madagascar. Even at the Cape, men and women of "Mozambican" and Madagascan descent made up close to a third of the population in the first half of the nineteenth century. Larson moves away from the archives and travel accounts of the region, dominated by French and English, to focus on the various speech forms carried to the islands by waves of Madagascan immigrants. He is particularly concerned to trace the fluctuating strength of these language communities over time and in space. This allows him to test sociological theories in the light of evidence drawn from a very wide range of primary and secondary sources. The result is an analysis set against the "cultural survivals" found by historians in recent work on Atlantic America and the process of "creolization" thought to dominate language and life in Mauritius. Negotiating his way through these two extremes, Larson develops a theory of "créolité-as-versatility" that sees language and identity as resources to be exploited with agility rather than as components of a zero-sum game. This leads him to argue that Madagascan identities and "ancestral tongues" existed alongside, and successfully interacted and competed with, other language forms into the middle of the nineteenth century, especially French-based Creole in Mauritius. His book calls for scholars to take

seriously the historical role of language in the construction of identity, and specifically for them to recognize the major role played by Madagascans in the history of the western Indian Ocean.

The history of the transcription of language forms in Madagascar starts with local diviner-healers who produced texts in Arabic script functional to their calling. When the French established a small colony on the southeastern corner of the island in the mid-seventeenth century, Catholic missionaries continued this tradition, producing small catechisms, this time in Latin script. The French took this linguistic tradition to Bourbon (Reunion) when they abandoned their foothold on the Madagascan coast; and when they occupied Île de France (Mauritius) in the wake of the departing Dutch, they peopled both islands with large numbers of Madagascan slaves. It was this community that, for the hundred years before the end of the slave trade in about 1830, "probably first forged... a proto-Malagasy national identity" (105). This community also fused its various dialects into a creole language that served for about sixty years after 1730 as a broad lingua franca for the many ethnic peoples brought to Mauritius as slaves. It was only once Mauritian-born creoles came to dominate the slave population that Malagasy lost its role as "an inter-ethnic contact language" (105), although many people continued to speak it into the 1850s. This challenges the view that slaves imported from various parts of Africa and Madagascar gave up their languages and adopted French, or a French-based Creole, in Mauritius. It is not to argue that Malagasy "survived," but rather that it changed and adapted, and was spoken, together with other languages, at specific moments for specific reasons.

This brings us back to the "Ocean of Letters" in the title. In the late eighteenth–early nineteenth centuries, the linguistic work of French missionaries and Mauritian colonists compressed Malagasy as an oral medium into a standard form. This written language reflected their religious and scholarly concerns rather than the real world of the slaves, who spoke (different) versions of Malagasy. Once the British seized control of Mauritius in 1810, they increasingly turned to Welsh Protestant missionaries who could serve as imperial emissaries in neighboring Madagascar. The Welsh missionaries based their version of the written "Malagasy" language on fieldwork and a close study of the highland Merina dialect. The language transcribed by the Welsh particularly served the interests of the British, for alongside their guns and ammunition, it helped advance the imperial frontiers of Britain's powerful Merina allies on the Big Island. This new, standard language, built around a translation of the full Bible in 1835, would soon displace the earlier, more diverse version of the language developed by the French Catholics and colonial scholars.

The new written Malagasy language spread to the Mascarenes and even the Cape as the Merina cut their ties with Britain and suppressed the practice of Christianity. This took waves of exiles literate in Malagasy into the corners of the western Indian Ocean just as the end of slavery in Mauri-

tius allowed Malagasy-speakers to form their own settlements of freemen. Together with the introduction of mass literacy training, these factors led to a renaissance of the Malagasy language and a resurgence of Malagasy identity in the late 1830–'40s. But this was not a Malagasy tied to one single political kingdom on the Big Island, for it came to reflect the influence of several languages, especially French, and portrayed the entire island as home. In this way, the "inchoate Malagasy national identity" arising in Mauritius (291) was the product of an entangled creolization.

A frenzy of letter-writing, or *Briefwut*, fed this process as ex-slaves and Christian refugees expressed their belonging in messages composed in the Malagasy language. Pier Larson is at pains to stress that historians have ignored the importance of the Malagasy diaspora because of their ignorance of this language and its history. This history of "invisibility" rested on the earlier refusal of slave masters to take an interest in the culture of servile laborers considered little more than commodities. It was also built into the letters and reports of missionaries, such as those at the Cape, who remained ignorant of the language and culture of Malagasy slaves and freemen. Pier Larson successfully challenges this invisibility in *Ocean of Letters*, and through a keen eye for the relationship between language and identity, both recaptures this forgotten history and makes an important contribution to debates about creolization.

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**D. A. Low. *Fabrication of Empire: The British and the Uganda Kingdoms, 1890–1902.*** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xix + 361 pp. Bibliography. Index. $111.00. Cloth.

Anthony Low is arguably the most comprehensive British historian of the British Empire; he is certainly the *doyen* of British historians of East Africa. From 1951 to 1958 he taught at Makerere University College, Uganda; for a while he was Uganda correspondent for the London *Times*. After five years in Canberra he moved to the University of Sussex, where he took a leading part in setting up the School of African and Asian Studies. From 1973 to 1982 he was back in Canberra, where he became vice-chancellor of the Australian National University. Then followed a decade in Cambridge, England, as professor of the history of the British Commonwealth.

Low's first research, for an Oxford doctorate, concerned relations between the British and the Baganda up to 1900. His first major publication, in 1960, was a brilliant analysis of the negotiations that resulted in the Uganda Agreement in 1900. As a seminal investigation of African agency, it was comparable in importance to Terence Ranger's 1967 study of the